DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 344 617 JC 920 086

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TITLE Convocation: Opening Day Remarks, Fashion Institute of Technology.
INSTITUTION Fashion Inst. of Tech., New York, N.Y.
PUB DATE 27 Jan 92
NOTE 13p.; Speech delivered at the Fashion Institute of Technology (New York, NY, January 27, 1992).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Affirmative Action; *Associate Degrees; College Planning; *Educational History; *Fashion Industry; Higher Education; *Institutional Mission; *Institutional Role; *Relevance (Education); Retrenchment; Technical Institutes

ABSTRACT

These opening day remarks by the Fashion Institute of Technology's (FIT's) retiring president focus on the Institute's educational history, mission, and future. First, the paper discusses FIT's finances which are undergoing a period of retrenchment due to a $700,000 cut in state aid, and an anticipated $500,000 reduction in city funds. The next section provides an update on institution-wide efforts to increase diversity, highlighting the Minority Recruitment and Retention Committee's newly established Committee on Diversity (which has developed an action plan to address student recruitment and retention, faculty/staff relations and administrative policy), and the Bias Mediation Committee (designed to help resolve matters of bias based on sex, race, religion, age, or disability). The final section, which focuses on the future direction of FIT, emphasizes the following activities/goals: (1) rekindling a common vision of FIT's history and mission by facilitating communication between the College's growing adjunct faculty and its more experienced full-time faculty; (2) maintaining institutional commitment to a professional education by supporting the 2 + 2 format which requires students to earn an associate in applied science degree before enrolling in a baccalaureate program; and (3) changing FIT's organizational structure and curricula to meet the complexities of the changing fashion industry. The paper concludes by tracing the 40-year growth of FIT's facilities and mission, beginning as a trade school primarily concerned with technique, and expanding to an internationally recognized institute of technology concerned with meaning, moral implication, cultural context, design, and communication. (JMC)

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CONVOCATION
OPENING DAY REMARKS
FASHION INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

January 27, 1992

Marvin Feldman
President

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Opening Day Remarks
Convocation
Katie Murphy Amphitheatre
January 27, 1992

Marvin Feldman
President
Fashion Institute of Technology
Seventh Avenue at 27 Street
New York, New York 10001-5992

Good morning. I'm happy to welcome you back. I'm looking forward to what promises to be an unusually busy and interesting semester, and I hope you are too.

I am sure it won't surprise most of you that lately I've been doing a lot of thinking about F.I.T., for various reasons First, the college is approaching its 50th anniversary in 1994, and that seems a logical point to look back on what we've accomplished and look forward to what's ahead. Second, the continuing budget crisis makes this a time to examine our priorities, our goals, our plans and our changing role as an institution of higher education. And of course, the upcoming Middle States, State Education Department, NASAD and FIDER reaccreditation evaluations have contributed to a general tendency toward self-scrutiny at the college (not to mention a slight hysteria in certain faculty members who've been working very, very hard on these projects -- and whom, by the way, I want to again thank publicly for their efforts).

And last, there's a personal reason, too. Having celebrated my 20th year as president of F.I.T. and announced my coming retirement, I'm naturally taking stock of my time here. And as I think about this place that has been my lifeblood for so long -- about our successes and remarkable achievements, our dreams and disappointments, and our hard, hard work in the service of some very important goals -- I feel for the past nostalgia, affection, some regret, and a great deal of pride. And I feel for the future a great deal of hope, and a certain degree of caution. And I think about what I would like to leave you as my legacy.

Of course, I'm not leaving just yet. First there's the little matter of finding a new president. The search is under way, but we can't predict how long it will take. However, since this <u>may</u> be my last chance to talk to you this way, as a group, I'm going to take the opportunity to say some things about the college that have been on my mind, and that I want the whole F.I.T. community to hear.

<u>The Budget</u>

Before I get to that, I want to say a few words about some other important matters. First, the budget. I know this is of great concern to everyone, and I want you all to know how things stand at the moment.

We received the Governor's budget early last week. In addition to our other woes, it seems that state aid to the college will be reduced again, this time by $700,000. We expect another cut from New York City, probably $500,000. I met last Thursday with Ed Sullivan, chairman of the Higher Education Committee of the State Assembly. He believes the cuts will stand, and we can expect very little relief from the state legislature.

This means that by July 1992, when the next fiscal year begins, we have to find about four million dollars. It's not just a matter of one-time savings, a little here and a little there and we're out of the woods. The down-sized budget will be with us for years to come, and we have to find new ways of doing things that can be sustained over the long term.

As far as saving money, we have many options, not unlike the ones we've seen at other colleges in the state. We have a long list of options developed jointly by the administration and the union, and we'll be looking hard at the various alternatives. Unfortunately, it won't be painless, but all of it will be negotiated, and I feel confident that we'll work out a good solution.

Diversity

Now, I want to follow up briefly on the issue of diversity, which I talked about at length at our last convocation. On the recommendation of the Minority Recruitment and Retention Committee, the Committee on Diversity was established to develop an action plan for the college. The new committee, drawing on the work of the Recruitment and Retention Committee, has prepared a very strong report with some excellent recommendations in such areas as student recruitment and retention, faculty/staff relations and administrative policy. One of the best recommendations is that we establish a Multicultural Affairs Office -- one that would have more voice than a typical committee -- to initiate change and monitor progress. I would like to see the Office put in place immediately, but unfortunately, I think it's clear we don't have the funds to do it now. It certainly should be done as soon as fiscally possible. In the meantime, a Bias Mediation Committee, a subcommittee of the Committee on Diversity, has been established to hear and help resolve matters of bias based on sex, race, religion, age or disability. Procedures have been set up to hear complaints, and the committee will review any such matters in strict confidence. Once the Multicultural Affairs Office has been established, the Bias Mediation Committee will function within the purview of that office. In the interim, the Committee on Diversity will continue to operate, with Lenore Gall continuing as chair.

The Committee has been doing impressive work, and I want to thank the members and Lenore for their efforts. I particularly want to commend them on drafting a fine "Institutional Statement on Diversity," which should be included in all appropriate F.I.T. publications.

Let me read it to you. "The Fashion Institute of Technology, a part of the State University of New York, is firmly committed to creating an environment that will attract and retain people of diverse racial and cultural backgrounds. By providing a learning and working environment that encourages, utilizes, respects and appreciates the full expression of every individual's ability, the F.I.T. community will not only dignify the mission of the institution but will grow because of a rich, pluralistic experience. The Fashion Institute of Technology is committed to reducing negative experiences that may be motivated by discriminatory attitudes against others based on race, religion, sexual orientation, gender or physical handicap. Any behavior that implicitly or explicitly carries messages of racism, sexism, stereotyping or discrimination of any kind will not be tolerated and will be subject to swift disciplinary action."

Bravo. That's just the kind of statement I wanted. Doesn't it say exactly what we all feel?

Now, as I've said, I plan to take this opportunity -- perhaps my last at this kind of forum -- to talk to you about F.I.T., a little of its history, its mission and its future.

Let me tell you why I feel this is necessary. I see signs that we may be losing our common vision, our sense of shared purpose, as we lose more and more of the old-timers who were here in the early days of this college's development, and more and more part-timers join our ranks.

I often wander the halls here when I have a free moment, poking my nose into classrooms and labs just to get a feel for what's going on. I recently dropped in on some classes that happened to be taught by adjuncts. And I was impressed with them. They're good teachers. They know their subjects. They're enthusiastic.

But I wonder, do they get the whole picture? Do they understand where their course fits in the overall curriculum? How it relates to other courses in the department or division, or how the department or division fits into the college? Do they know or care whether they're teaching one-

year students who already have a college degree, or upper division students, or AAS students experiencing college for the first time? And would they do anything different if they knew? And most of all, I wonder if they know what this college is all about, or understand its educational mission -- and where their particular course fits into that mission.

So I am glad we have a number of veterans around not only as experienced teachers, but as repositories of F.I.T. history -- keepers of the flame, so to speak -- who are intimately connected to this college, who remember how and why it developed as it did, who recall the excitement of conquering new ground with this absolutely unique institution as it grew.

I believe those of us who do remember have a duty to convey that perspective to our younger and greener colleagues, especially those adjuncts who are uninvolved with curriculum and other faculty committees, and may view F.I.T. as little more than a second job they run to after work -- or those who are waiting for a full-time appointment before immersing themselves in college activities. This is becoming even more important as the tough economy forces us to hire increasing numbers of part-timers, and as many more veterans retire. And in emphasizing a certain attitude about F.I.T., I'm talking not only about faculty, I'm also talking about staff; growing numbers of our staff are part-timers, too. <u>All</u> of us represent the college. And I think you know my feelings about how a clerk should answer the telephone or greet a student.

We must rekindle a vision of F.I.T. that all of us can share, that can unify the new F.I.T. community as it did the old. My wish is to begin to do this here today.

In talking to many people here at F.I.T., and at SUNY and CUNY, and in the industry, I've learned there are many different visions of F.I.T.-- and many different hopes for its future. A perfect example is the role of the AAS degree in the F.I.T. curriculum. Some think that since we now grant bachelor's degrees we might just as well abandon our commitment to the associate degree programs and become a four-year college.

If you know me at all, you know how strongly I disagree. I believe in our two-plus-two format that requires students to earn the AAS before enrolling in a baccalaureate program. I believe this is at the very heart of F.I.T.'s remarkable success -- and for a student retention rate that's the best among community colleges in the SUNY system, and possibly the nation.

Cynthia Wellins, our grants officer, has noted that students choose F.I.T. precisely because of our career orientation. They take seriously the messages that come from our professional faculty, who are required to have had at least six years of industry experience.

Since our professional faculty know the importance of communications, writing and speaking, liberal arts and even physical education, our organizational culture drives us into general education through our professional courses.

We should not be seduced by the notion -- so popular with traditional educators -- that underprepared students need more general education, more liberal arts, before going on to specialize in their chosen field.

This simply does not work for many students -- particularly the ones we have to try hardest to reach. What they need is rigorous, professional education in their chosen field right from the start. That's what they're good at. That's what they're interested in. That's why they're here in the first place.

I'm not suggesting we ignore everything but professional education for these students. By the time they leave us, they should have a broad, comprehensive education. But I am saying we'll lose them if we don't give them a satisfying learning experience that allows them, perhaps for the first time in their lives, to associate education with accomplishment, not failure. With pride, not shame.

How we do this will be up to you. So don't be fooled by those who say that under a bachelor's degree program we can still provide professional education first. It might happen for a year or two. But then you'll begin to hear about the need for prerequisites, such as one year of English, math, science, history, before courses in the majors can be taken. Also, we need to be aware that the format we choose -- two-plus-two or four-year -- will determine the nature of our student body. We should think about the kinds of people we want to attract; they're not necessarily traditional students. A lot of them are in a hurry to make their mark, and they march to a different drummer.

While I hope you will again consider the need for a common general semester for some of our students before they select a major, please be careful where that leads.

This is an issue that will have to be worked out among all of you and your new administration. And it's one that will be pivotal in determining the college's future directions.

F.I.T. will also continue to be shaped by changes in our industries. Traditionally, the industry has been divided into distinct segments: the fiber industry, the textile industry, apparel, retail, home furnishings, advertising, and dozens of other related industries. But now technology is forcing us to see these segments as integral parts of a larger whole. Design, manufacture and distribution can be seen as a single, systematized process. Their fortunes are interrelated.

The currents of change transforming our industries are also transforming us. Collaborative efforts between industry and F.I.T. are increasing, as we try to cope with accelerating change. This means our current organizational structure is, in my opinion, no longer valid. Before the fiscal crisis, we were planning to present to the Board of Trustees a new organizational chart with new divisions -- a Division of Design Arts, of Communication Arts, of Management Arts, and so on -- and within the divisions, new departmental organization. I am sure the plan was not perfect. But one similar to it will have to be created when we are fiscally stable again. The new organization should ensure that all students in what is now the Business and Technology Division learn about art, and all Art and Design Division students learn about business. The business of art, and art in business, should be part of the F.I.T. education.

The need for education has become more or less continuous, as workers constantly learn new skills -- and new jobs -- throughout their lives. Employers in all our industries are turning to us for help in research and development, in training and re-training, even in out-placement.

F.I.T. is in fact a model of this. The Advanced Apparel Manufacturing Technology Demonstration facility (AAMTD) is a good example; it's leading us in all kinds of new directions. We will need to examine the role of industrial research and of the Seminar Department in our new organization.

Few if any of us in this room remember the college's bare beginnings back in 1944, in a borrowed classroom with 10 borrowed instructors and 100 students. But all of us have been part of the remarkable growth that F.I.T. has undergone in response to our industries' burgeoning needs.

We now have 14,000 students, 25 majors, 17 associate degree programs, 12 bachelor's and three master's programs. We occupy a five-building complex and three dormitories. The community we serve is worldwide. And we serve almost every aspect of every industry that touches on fashion.

back when the C Building was

Many of you weren't around b around the halls a couple of all there was, and if you walked into just about everyone who times you could count on running you here don't remember those worked at the college. Most of yt status for granted. But days. So we take F.I.T.'s curren truly phenomenal. Our we shouldn't. Our growth has beam serve as a model for hard-won innovations in curriculu the world. We have educational institutions all over projects and study-abroad international technical assistanought a community college programs. Who would ever have thy? could do what we do here every da

broadest sense, recognizing

We now define fashion in its othing. And now that we are that fashion is more than just cbe defensive about our name, who we are, we will never again b or about fashion education.

Kennedy Fraser's splendid

There's a quote I like from hion is synonymous with book, The Fashionable Mind: "Fasl change. In areas as change -- substantive, fundamentas that surround our bodies, diverse as the fabric environmentonomics and even politics. design, architecture, science, ec apparently discrete areas. There is fashion in each of these whether in the home, office There is fashion in daily living, or community.

e: history and future. It

Fashion is not fad but chang headlines. It reflects the has less to do with hemlines than] is simply the lens news and makes the news. [Fashiores itself and the mold to through which our society perceivlf." which it increasingly shapes itse

und us. It's there,

So fashion is everywhere arc planned, movies made, wherever political strategies arees danced, editorial critical columns turned out, dancses germinated; wherever policies formulated, academic the shared forms of self- people think, speak or create our expression.

he larger sense is critical

This concept of fashion in tay we position the college to our vision of F.I.T., to the w move toward the 21st and communicate its message as we mark as an educational century. To continue to make itshion community it was force, F.I.T. must answer the fas graduates with the most established to serve by providingtion we possibly can. cohesive, industry-relevant educa

cts fashion's "unstoppable

Because education that projeder of our culture, as a motion" (and its value as a recorof communicating a universal socio-economic force, as a means career, any business, any language) is preparation for any sitive, perceptive eye. The profession that requires an inqui

person whose eye has been trained to see connections and their implications makes the most competent manager, designer, planner, employer or employee.

And it is not only change, but its immediacy, to which the fashion-oriented mind responds with the ability to translate the signals of change into the products and services today's society requires.

Educating for the fashion industry is a great challenge, because what the industry needs tomorrow, we need to be producing today. At its best, fashion education is an early warning signal of changes that will irrevocably reshape the industry. A fashion education equips people to welcome the future precisely because it confronts the future head-on.

The complexity of the fashion business, its growth goals, its worldwide reach, its marketing orientation and its new power structure have dramatically affected F.I.T.'s education strategy. The addition of new courses of study and new interdisciplinary curricula has become absolutely essential.

New majors will evolve, as soon as fiscal constraints are eased. Product design, music management, model making, even ornamental horticulture ... the list of unmet needs never ends. In addition, new options and changes in our existing curriculum will result in new courses, such as facilities management in the Interior Design Department and computer design for film, video and animation. There will also be new options for print media in Advertising Design. I'm certain that within the next five years, every major will undergo profound change.

Beyond preparing people to work in specialized areas of the fashion industry, F.I.T. is educating men and women to see fashion from the broadest marketing perspective.

What we are doing in educating people for careers in fashion has an importance beyond technique. It has an urgent cultural importance. Our culture and our humanity are expressed through the things we make, and not apart from them. We are the clothes we wear, the implements we use, the instruments we play, the structures we inhabit, the entertainments we enjoy. These things are not all we are, but they are much of what we are.

So fashion is not frivolous. And designers are not mere technicians offering designs that are technically correct. Designers are the custodians of the culture. They must be aware of the larger meaning of what they are doing. They must express values in their designs. And so in educating

people for careers in fashion, we can be an important civilizing force, and not just competent purveyors of technique.

Forty years ago, as a trade school, we needed only to be concerned with technique. Now we have tasks of a higher order. We concern ourselves with meaning, with moral implication, with cultural context, with design and with communication. We create an awareness and understanding of the larger consequences of what we do.

What happens here is special, and often quite profound. This is a unique college. It has no peer. No other college does what we do the way we do it. We have become the world's largest, most comprehensive and important center of learning and research for fashion in the broader sense. F.I.T. has become a central part of the industries we serve. F.I.T.'s symbiotic alliance with the fashion industry equips the college to be uniquely responsive to the changes that will continue to affect the broadest spectrum of business. We are preparing our students to cope with a business world that has become global, infinitely more complex, more sophisticated financially.

We have no actual statistics on how many of our graduates are in their own businesses, but we know from our contacts with industry that the numbers are significant. We increasingly view education for entrepreneurship as an important part of our mandate. **We are here not just to prepare people for jobs, which will always be scarce, but for work, which will always be abundant.** We pay attention to the people who discover work on their own, who create their own employment -- the self-employed, who also create employment for others. I think of Jhane Barnes, Norma Kamali, Stephen Burrows, Jon Haggins and so many more.

Moreover, work within organizations is becoming more entrepreneurial. Employers in many fields now want people who are self-starters, who think creatively, who respond to market requirements without close supervision. Emphasis on this vital new dimension of employability is increasingly evident at F.I.T.

Today, I've been talking about the two interconnected aspects of what we do here. There's the philosophical -- the nature of creativity, the cultural implications of design, and so on. And then there's the more immediately practical, which to my mind is no less inspiring. We're not really about hemlines or creating clever advertisements or designing a cute toy -- although some of our classes are concerned with

those things. We're about skills and self-esteem and work for our students. We're about a complex of industries that is increasingly sophisticated and dynamic -- and one of the most economically significant in the world.

Now, in case there are some skeptics out there who still do not believe that what we are doing here is powerful and profound, I can quote you a higher authority. Did you know F.I.T. is mentioned in the Bible. Well, maybe it's not mentioned by name, but it's really in there, in a passage from Exodus about the building of the tabernacle. I discovered this while rereading an old "Tora Today" column in the Jerusalem Post. It's all about master builders, gifted artists and the creative process, and it explains that knowledge alone, no matter how vast, is empty without the understanding of how to apply it. F.I.T. is built on this very principle -- and so, I want you to know you're doing holy work.

I'm being facetious, but only slightly. We are often told that the liberal arts serve to liberate the artisan from the narrowness of her or his special skill. But it is also true that the liberal arts need the nourishment of practical expression. Artisanship and the liberal arts reinforce each other here. Together they create culture.

One of our goals is to improve the quality of life through all aspects of artisanship. Our graduates help create and extend the options that make our society civilized. Without these options, life would be ugly, empty and drab.

Our institution is vital because we have a clear understanding that the liberation of people from degrading concerns is expressed through things and not apart from them. F.I.T. is vital because we recognize that people give purpose and integrity to life by doing and making useful and beautiful things, and by communicating ways to use these artifacts to provide a richer and fuller life.

The fantastic growth of our college is a tribute to the stubborn, sacrificial persistence of hundreds of people -- board members, administrators, faculty and staff, both past and present. In a nation entranced by more fashionable forms of education, members of our faculty and administration have insisted over and over that the first step in human liberation must be liberation from a sense of uselessness -- from dependency -- and that this can be achieved through the mastery of a marketable skill. Our view has begun to prevail. So we have achieved a new legitimacy, a new acceptance and a new maturity. Today we are fiercely proud to be part of it.

And so, at last I come to what I want to leave you with today -- what I hope will be my legacy. A sense of purpose. A shared vision. A love for what we do here, and pride in what we have built. A future limited only by your imagination and determination. I know that times are hard, but never let that scare you into thinking small. The darker the night, the brighter the stars.

F.I.T. needs your grand plans and outrageous dreams. It needs your commitment, your passion and your vision. Talk to each other. Work together. Keep the pioneer spirit alive. Keep using the F.I.T. standards of performance -- they've been tested, and they work. If you'll do that, I will place this marvelous institution in your hands with confidence and joy.

Truly, I am blessed to have been your president, and I thank you for helping build a model institution that was only a dream 20 years ago.

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